

Factors to consider when establishing a differentiated classroom

Brain research

Increased intrinsic motivation guarantees buy-in and enthusiasm for learning!

Increased intrinsic motivation	Increased apathy and resentment
Choices content, process, product groups, resources, environment	Required no student voice, restricted resources
Relevant Meaningful, connected to learner, deep understanding	Irrelevant impersonal, out of context, only to pass a test
Engaging emotional, energetic, hands on, learner input	Passive Low interaction, lecture seatwork

Source: (Jensen, 1998)

Choice: the great motivator

- Requires students to be aware of their own readiness, interests and learning profiles.
- Students have choices provided by the teacher. The teacher always remains responsible for crafting challenging opportunities for all students.
- Use choice across the curriculum, for example, writing topics, content writing prompts, self-selected reading, contract menus, maths problems, spelling words, product and assessment options, seating, group arrangement.

Start small

Introduce differentiation slowly. Start with something like allowing choice during reading and writing, or grouping more flexibly and gradually increase differentiation strategies. Tiering lessons is often a good way to start.

Tiering involves using varied levels of tasks to ensure that students explore ideas and use skills at a level that builds on what they already know to encourage growth.

While students work at varied degrees of difficulty on their tasks, they all explore the same essential ideas and work at different levels of thought.

Tiering can be based on challenge level, complexity, resources, outcome, process, or product.

Teachers can choose to tier by:

- **challenge level** (Bloom's Taxonomy)
- **complexity** (Tiering by complexity allows the teacher to address the needs of students at introductory levels as well as the needs of students who are ready for more advanced work)
- **resources** (Selecting materials at various reading levels and complexity of content, is an example of tiering assignments by resources. Students using the same materials but arriving at varying end products is also an example of tiering by resources)
- **process** (The end products are the same but the ways students arrive at those outcomes may vary)
- **product** (Group by multiple intelligences or learning styles followed by assignments that fit those preferences).

Tiered assignments should be:

- different work, not simply more or less work
- equally active
- equally interesting and engaging
- fair in terms of work expectations and time needed
- requiring the use of key concepts, skills, or ideas.

Routines and procedures for working with small groups of students

Giving careful consideration to establishing classroom routines and procedures before an attempt is made to establish a fully differentiated classroom is ideal.

Consider the following four guidelines.

- Be sure students you are not working with know what to do while you are busy with other students. Set up practice sessions where students work silently on a task according to particular directions without a teacher centred focus. Do this several times before meeting with small groups.
- Use an 'expert of the day' to handle student questions and needs while you work with small groups. Designate one or more students who will go over directions, check work, help with skills, etc., while you are working directly with a small group. Students should learn from the beginning that you are 'off limits' while you are teaching small groups. All students can serve as experts in some way as the year progresses.
- Use 'anchor activities' for students who finish required work (or get stuck and can't proceed) while you work with small groups.

Be sure groups are flexibly, not predictably formed – consider readiness, interests, random, pairs, groups of six or eight for example. Be sure not to create predictable groups of eagles, emus and wombats.

Anchor activities

Anchor activities are ongoing assignments that students can work on independently throughout a lesson sequence/unit. It is important that anchor activities tie to the content and instruction and are not merely ‘busy’ work.

Anchor activities can be used in the following ways:

- to provide meaningful work for students when they finish an assignment/project/task
- to settle students when they first enter the class or begin the lesson
- to continue productive work when they are ‘stumped’ and while waiting for teacher support
- to ‘free up’ the teacher to work with other groups of students or individuals.

Suggested steps for introducing and using anchor activities to support group work:

1. Teach the whole class to work independently and quietly on the anchor activity.		
2. Half the class works on anchor activity.		Other half works on a different activity.
3. One third works on anchor activity.	One third works on a different activity.	One third works with teacher direct instruction.

Characteristics of effective anchor activities

- Important — related to key knowledge, understanding and skill
- Interesting — appeal to student curiosity, interest and learning preference
- Allow choice — students can select from a range of options
- Clear routines and expectations — students know what they are to do and how to do it and record their learning
- Seldom marked — teachers should examine the work as they move around the room. Students may hand in work for feedback. Students may get a grade/mark for working effectively, but seldom for the work itself. The motivation is interest and/or improved achievement.

Vary activities/learning experiences

Readiness: A differentiated classroom does not mean teaching students one by one. In a differentiated classroom the teacher attempts to provide enough variety so that learning is a better fit for more students. That is, on one day a teacher may assign one task to students who seem to be having difficulty with a particular idea or skill and another to students who don’t seem to be having difficulty.

Interests: Think in terms of manageable ranges of options. A range of four interest-based options for students may not be a perfect match for everyone's interests, but having four options is likely to engage more students than if there were no options at all.

Learning profiles: Students may prefer to work alone or with a partner; work in a quiet area for example. Give students a range of manageable options to complete work.

Scaffolding for readiness

Scaffolding or temporary support can be provided in four different ways. At different times it may be necessary to use different forms of scaffolding for students.

Scaffolding content: selecting and sequencing content to enable students to learn and be successful. Careful attention is given to the order in which content is presented.

Scaffolding tasks: the overall sequencing of tasks. The tasks gradually increase in difficulty.

Individual/group scaffolding: support being provided by another individual to link the learner/s with new information and tasks. This assistance is withdrawn gradually, passing responsibility to the individual.

Material scaffolding: providing structures and materials to support students as they learn and apply concepts, facts and strategies.

Scaffolding examples:

- directions that give more structure – or less
- tape recorders to help with reading or writing beyond the student's grasp
- icons to help interpret print
- re-teaching/extending teaching
- modelling
- clear criteria for success
- reading buddies (with appropriate directions)
- double entry journals with appropriate challenge
- teaching through multiple modes
- use of 'hands-on' activities when needed
- gearing reading materials to student reading level
- use of study guides
- use of organisers.

References

Jensen, E. (1998). *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.